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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.

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Statement

1. Soroptimist International, a global voice for women and girls from a wide socio-economic spectrum, presents the participants at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women with a challenge. Can we, as advocates and activists for women and girls, take the courageous and controversial steps to achieve true, meaningful and sustainable gender equality in education and employment? Can we look beyond numbers and dig into the underlying economic, social and cultural determinants of women and girls' ability to achieve their fullest potential in education and employment? Soroptimist International calls upon Government officials, representatives of civil society, the private sector and all interested parties to join together in collaboration and partnership to make a difference. We submit the following statement illustrating some of the fundamental barriers Soroptimist International has identified through its global network of 90,000 women in 125 countries, and women and girl-driven recommendations to overcome these barriers.

2. Learning and leadership for girls and women at all ages is the foundation for development, economic growth and poverty reduction. Despite their clear benefits, we live in a world where many women, in both the global North and the global South, lack basic skills in reading and writing. Quality of education must be as much a priority as enrolment rates; an equal opportunity to learn is no less a human right than the right to be enrolled in school. Girls from minority backgrounds or rural communities are far less likely to enrol in school and, if they do, are less likely to achieve the same outcomes as their peers. Discrimination, gender stereotypes, and even low self-esteem create environments where girls cannot perform to their potential. These barriers remain a constant challenge throughout women's lifetimes. Most educational aid targets children and adolescents, leaving already vulnerable women without access to learning opportunities.

3. Soroptimist International works to ensure that women and girls have access to skills and confidence throughout their lifetimes to enable improved outcomes and achievements in education and employment. Across the globe, there are hundreds of successful local, national and international Soroptimist projects working to educate and empower girls and women. Our experience illustrates both what works and what we still need to do. With this in mind, Soroptimist International urges Governments, civil society, and partners to:

(a) Ensure that policies and programmes take a life-course approach to education and employment, recognizing and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages and that women and girls have different needs at different times in their lives;

(b) Improve and prioritize appropriately disaggregated (on the basis, inter alia, of gender, age and ethnicity) and internationally comparable data collection, encompassing process and outcome indicators. It is unacceptable to allow numbers and statistics to mask underlying inequalities;

(c) Work with local partners to improve facilities so that women and girls are afforded education that is accessible, acceptable, available and of good quality. This includes gender-appropriate and -sensitive sanitation facilities, safe environments, dormitories for girls and other aspects as required;

(d) Take a human rights-based approach to education and employment, bringing particular attention and focus to the participation of women and girls in decision- and policymaking in a broad range of settings, including both the public and private spheres;

(e) Understand that education is more than traditional learning in classroom settings and therefore to take a holistic approach, including the skills-and-confidence framework championed by Soroptimist International;

(f) Take the necessary steps to change societal perceptions of traditionally "female"-dominated fields such as teaching, nursing, caregiving and domestic work, to show the phenomenal impact and importance of these professions. We must collectively increase our valuation of these professions, both culturally and economically, and ensure that these professions are remunerated in ways that adequately reflect their impact and importance;

(g) Consider also that by encouraging women to enter traditionally "male"-dominated fields, there may be an inherent and underlying message that traditionally "female"-dominated fields are of lesser quality and importance. Alongside encouraging women to enter into traditionally "male"-dominated fields, we also must work to encourage men to enter into traditionally "female"-dominated fields to truly overcome and change occupational segregation. The unconscious bias in job selection works both ways;

(h) Legislate and advocate for increased paternity leave; women and men must have equal opportunity to achieve a work-life balance, thus changing societal perceptions of the gender stereotypes in childcare and taking the first steps towards equalizing career progression. Additionally, as noted by many experts in the field, improving return to work schemes for both women and men will also work towards equality;

(i) Approach sex- or gender-based quotas with careful planning and ensure that women, from an early age, are fully equipped with all of the knowledge and skills necessary to take on leadership roles for which there may be allocations or other similar mechanisms; otherwise, we are creating a system that inadvertently sets women up to fail, thus reinforcing antiquated sexist perspectives. A woman who is given a position because of her sex, not her qualifications, is not achieving gender equality. On the other hand, a woman who is given a job because she has had equal and meaningful access to education through her life, has been afforded the same opportunities as men, has achieved her fullest potential and is fully qualified for the position achieves true gender equality.

4. The following are examples of successful Soroptimist projects that highlight some of the points mentioned above:

The life-course approach. Members of a Soroptimist International Club in the United States meet weekly with girls and women from a local domestic violence safe house to teach them job-seeking skills. Many of the women have never held jobs nor had the proper training to obtain employment. In today's market it is even more crucial that they have these essential skills.

Accessibility, acceptability, availability and quality. A club sponsored a local woman in Zambia to train and qualify as a teacher. She became the first qualified female teacher at the school. Members also sent money to buy books and equipment

for the school. Local girls needed a role model to encourage them to attend school. Women also needed the confidence to attend. There are now four female teachers at the school with over 1,000 pupils attending regularly; approximately 50 per cent are girls. Three hundred adults (mainly women) attend regularly in the afternoon.

Improving facilities. A Soroptimist International club in Thailand and a partner school identified a need for a dormitory to provide lodging for female students. Many young girls in the north of their country, particularly hill tribe girls, fall victim to human trafficking due to poverty and lack of education. By providing lodging for them at school, the club has decreased the possibility of this happening. A year-long club fund-raising effort was sufficient to pay for the building. The club's project committee made several visits to the school to ensure that the right need was being met and that the site was suitable. A Soroptimist International club in India, with the financial support of other clubs, worked with a local partner to fund and install 62 eco-friendly, low-maintenance toilets for the 270 inhabitants of a village, of whom 130 are women and girls. This has improved the safety, health and hygiene of the villagers, especially the women and girls. Now that the club has built up a good relationship with the community, and with the necessary partners, the club is working to address other issues for the village such as poor access, a lack of income-generating opportunities, poor educational facilities and the lack of a guaranteed source of clean water.

A holistic approach. Soroptimists worked in partnership with UNICEF to provide emergency "School in a Box" kits to earthquake-devastated areas. The kit contains supplies and materials for a teacher and 40 students. The purpose of the kit is to ensure the continuation of children's education in the first 72 hours of an emergency.

Encouraging women to enter traditionally "male"-dominated fields. The Soroptimist International President's appeal of 10 December 2000, "Legacy of learning", provided funds to ensure that young girls in Inner Mongolia could not only complete their compulsory six-year education, but also acquire practical skills training in horticulture, animal husbandry and basic veterinary science. Since its launch the project has achieved remarkable results: about 300 impoverished girls have returned to school. Nine training facilities were built to meet their study needs, including a greenhouse for growing vegetables and flowers, a sty, a cowshed and a forage base.

Encouraging women to enter traditionally "male"-dominated fields. A club in South Africa identified two indigent learners who showed potential to do well in mathematics and science. As South Africa has a shortage of women in the fields of mathematics and science, the club decided to sponsor them for the final three years of their high school education, covering school fees, uniforms, transport and extracurricular activities.

Equipping women with knowledge and skills. A Soroptimist club in Mauritius is a founding member of Women in Networking, which launched Women in Politics in January 2009. Women are underrepresented in Parliament and in local councils although they represent over 51 per cent of the population. A specialized trainer was recruited to train trainers, who then trained a further 22 women who had applied through an advertisement in the press. In addition, Women in Politics partnered with Gender Links, which ran three courses for women in the main political parties. Over 70 women have been trained in campaign and election skills. Some of these women ran for office in the general election and were elected.